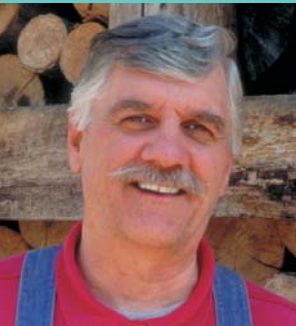
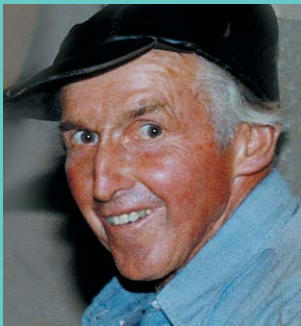




Connecting People to Parks

A Visitor
Services
Strategy for
the Northeast
Region
National Park
Service



Introduction

The Road Ahead: A Strategy for Achieving Excellence in Interpretation and Education in the Northeast Region, released in 1997, set a new course for Interpretation and Education in the NPS Northeast Region (NER). It raised the national profile of interpretation and education and served as a model for other regions. The strategy articulated a vision that highlighted the value of national parks in American society and underscored the pivotal role of interpretation and education in fostering connections with the public.

Parks in the Northeast Region answered the call for excellence and continue to work diligently to achieve the goals and actions identified in the strategy. Great strides have been made over the last seven years. However, we must all seek out new opportunities and rise to the complex challenges that will demand our collective experience and leadership in the years ahead. Responding to changes like these will not be easy. In fact, some may question the need for a far-reaching strategy in light of the unpredictability of our times. But the value of the vision outlined in this revised strategy is to guide us in making informed choices and to set priorities.

The strategy allows us to be proactive and consciously choose our direction rather than have circumstances dictate that direction. Of course, the pace of change and manner of achieving goals will vary according to circumstances, but this strategy will help ensure that our standards remain high.

The goals of this revised interpretation and education strategy demand new approaches, new thinking, and new technology suited to our times. How well we accomplish the actions in this strategy will depend upon how well we adapt to new ways of doing business. We must all develop new skills that have not traditionally been associated with the field of interpretation. Developing business plans, integrating systems to track needs and costs, and cultivating effective partnerships will leverage NPS resources to ensure that we can sustain our investments in the future. We need to live within the reality of our budget environment by seeking new and effective ways to provide the services the public has come to expect from its national parks.

This NER interpretation and education strategy incorporates the specific goals and actions of the NPS Advisory Board recommendations from *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century* (2001), *Renewing Our Education Mission* (2003), and the NER Strategic Plan (2001). The principles of civic engagement are embedded throughout the strategy to involve the public, partners, and NPS colleagues in dialogue designed to strengthen the role of parks in examining the values of society and encouraging citizens to reflect on the meanings ascribed to park resources. These principles inform the way we manage parks and help to create a seamless network to ensure the protection of resources and provide a range of interpretive and recreational opportunities.

The NPS will celebrate its centennial in 2016. To remain relevant to the American people, the Service has evolved since the days of Stephen T. Mather and Horace Albright. Audience demographics and expectations, the needs of society, and the demands of responsible stewardship require that we periodically evaluate where we are and where we are going. Virtual experiences and other technology-based innovations afford exciting new ways for the public to connect with parks and for parks to connect with the public. New scholarship enriches our stories, reveals context, and informs connections and thematic links between the parks that tell America's story.

Connecting People to Parks: A Visitor Services Strategy for the Northeast Region reflects the work of many talented field and regional interpreters and managers. The NER Interpretive Advisory Group (IAG) has played an active role in the revision of this strategy and will continue to provide leadership that helps us achieve our goals. The strategy acknowledges change and commits to a course of action that engages communities, fosters stewardship, and leads to a range of opportunities and experiences that continue to help people make relevant connections with their national parks.

Connecting People to Parks:

A Visitor Services Strategy for the Northeast Region

GOAL 1 – Connect People to America’s Stories

Each park provides opportunities for all people to experience authentic, tangible resources that help them understand and draw inspiration from larger meanings, concepts, themes, and stories about our natural world and cultural heritage.

GOAL 2 – Use a Business Approach to Enhance Financial Means and Capacity

Parks develop and adopt best business practices to leverage NPS resources and to ensure the implementation of effective interpretive and educational opportunities for all people.

GOAL 3 – Evaluate and Identify Best Practices

To achieve the best practices in Interpretation and Education, each park fosters a culture that uses relevant social science techniques to continuously develop, assess, and improve visitor experiences.

GOAL 4 – Collaborate with Others

Each park connects to the National Park System and seeks opportunities to link themes and build relationships with parks and partners locally, nationally, and globally.

GOAL 5 – Connect People to Places through Technology

Each park integrates established and emerging technologies to enhance interpretive and education programs to reach new audiences.

GOAL 6 – Open New Doors to Learning

Parks provide meaningful and relevant resource-based opportunities for life-long learning for diverse audiences, particularly for cultural minorities and populations who have felt excluded from parks. Schools, colleges, civic and academic institutions, organizations, and life-long learners recognize and use parks as dynamic classrooms to enhance learning, to engage in civic dialogue, and to transform their interests into personal action.

GOAL 7 – Invest in Students and Educators

Parks offer curriculum-based education programs for students of all ages, especially school-age students, so that children have quality educational “park experiences” during their elementary and high school years.

GOAL 8 – Foster America’s Best Interpreters and Educators

Interpreters at all levels seek their own professional development opportunities and execute their responsibilities with innovation and professionalism. NPS managers create a climate conducive to professional growth and learning.

GOAL 1

Connect People to America's Stories

Each park provides opportunities for all people to experience authentic, tangible resources that help them understand and draw inspiration from larger meanings, concepts, themes, and stories about our natural world and cultural heritage.

Action I

Each park provides opportunities for visitors to discover the relevance and significance of park resources, using current research, sound scholarship, and civic engagement strategies to inform the development of all interpretation and education services and tell stories in a manner that reveals a broad context.

Parks work with representatives from their desired audiences to create, present, and evaluate interpretive programming to ensure that it is inclusive, thought-provoking, and relevant. Parks needing assistance with identifying desired audiences should contact NER.

Parks work with experienced professionals and the public to develop high-quality, varied methods of delivery (personal services and interpretive media) to increase opportunities for *all people* to connect with and learn from park resources.

Action II

Parks “maintain an atmosphere that is open, inviting, and accessible to every segment of American Society.” (NPS Management Policies)

Each park actively encourages the public to be involved in park planning and programming, and uses a variety of strategies (e.g., workshops, focus groups, scholars’ roundtables) to ensure that diverse people have opportunities to contribute ideas, provide input, and be actively involved in their park.

Each park involves interpreters, educators, stakeholders, and subject matter experts in developing Foundation documents (park purpose, significance, interpretive themes, and fundamental resources and values – consult DO2), General Management Plans and Comprehensive Interpretive Plans (visitor experiences, audience, and issues).

GOAL 2

Use a Business Approach to Enhance Financial Means and Capacity

Parks develop and adopt best business practices to leverage NPS resources and to ensure the implementation of effective interpretive and educational opportunities for all people.

Action I

Interpreters participate in preparing Transition Management Assistance Programs (TMAP) and business plans in order to fully integrate I & E considerations (budget, staffing and visitation trends, program and service needs) and to identify sustainable operating base requirements and a funding and outreach strategy (per 2003-2006 NER Strategic Plan).

Action II

To ensure that the needs of interpretation and education are included, NER interpreters provide ongoing evaluation of existing NPS systems (FMSS, MIDS, etc.) and suggest modifications to Regional interpretation and education staff as needed.

Action III

In order to successfully compete for all available funding sources, NER Interpretive Managers will:

Take an interdisciplinary approach, collaborating with other divisions and partners to develop project funding proposals (PMIS statements, grant proposals, etc.). Work with other divisions to identify opportunities to include I & E in project proposals. (Look for opportunities to think “outside the box”: for example, funding a brochure to share recent scholarship, science, or maintenance efforts, or including funding for exhibits in new or rehab construction.)

Capitalize on the expertise within the Regional Office and among Interpretive Park Managers to identify and share effective funding approaches. For example, share successful PMIS statements, strategies, and interpretive products.

Action IV

The Regional Office provides Service-wide leadership to identify ways to quantify and assess interpretive services and inventory current conditions of interpretive facilities, media, and personal services to inform decision-making, set priorities, effectively allocate resources, and determine costs/needs to sustain these interpretive assets over time.

Action V

Interpreters apply sustainable design principles to all aspects of the operations, from existing programs to the design of new facilities. (For example, use the expertise of a variety of design professionals, universities, trade institutions, and others to develop sustainable and cost-effective innovative approaches.)

From the outset, interpreters collaborate with design and construction professionals in all phases of any visitor use rehab/construction project to create designs that facilitate interpretive program goals and the visitor experience, while minimizing costs such as on-going maintenance and staffing of the facility and interpretive media.

GOAL 3

Evaluate and Identify Best Practices

To achieve the best practices in Interpretation and Education, each park fosters a culture that uses relevant social science techniques to develop, assess, and improve visitor experiences.

Action I

Parks identify effective evaluation tools and social science practices in use by such groups as Visitor Studies Association, American Association of

Museums, NPS Interpretive Development Program, NPS Visitor Studies and Social Science Program, and Harpers Ferry Center and post this information on the NER Intranet site.

Action II

Parks identify guidelines and training to use existing evaluation tools and social science techniques or develop new ones in order to assess interpretive and education programs/services.

Action III

NER Interpretive Managers will work with fund managers to include interpretive criteria, where appropriate, in the evaluation of funding requests.

Action IV

Parks and the regional office evaluate, identify, and disseminate the best practices in Interpretation and Education. (This is identified in the NER Strategic Plan. Target date: 12/31/05.)

GOAL 4

Collaborate with Others

Each park connects to the National Park System and seeks opportunities to link themes and build relationships with parks and partners locally, nationally, and globally.

Action I

Parks strengthen their identity—and clearly communicate the fact that each park is a unit of the National Park System—by implementing the message project graphic standards, by including mission-related messages in programs and media, and by linking parks with related NPS sites and programs.

Action II

Parks identify the thematic links and practical alliances that they have with other national park sites, heritage resources (state and local parks, museums, historic sites, etc.), and community organizations. Mutually beneficial relationships are created to achieve common goals.

Action III

NER provides guidelines on how to develop and maintain strategic, fiscally sound partnerships that benefit park operations and partners, support management objectives, and promote the NPS mission.

GOAL 5

Connect People to Places through Technology

Each park integrates established and emerging technologies to enhance interpretive and education programs and reach new audiences.

Action I

Parks consider and capitalize on the potential of technology when updating existing planning documents (General Management Plans, Comprehensive Interpretive Plans, Education Plans, etc.) and writing new ones. Effective planning determines the appropriate use of technology.

Action II

Parks review their entire park website and identify and eliminate duplication between the profile and expanded web pages. Each park modifies and treats the profile and expanded sites as a single entity. Note: Parks must register planned and ongoing web projects with WASO.
<http://inside.nps.gov/webprojects/> (See DO #70.)

Action III

Parks research and develop the use of technology for programs and services through collaboration with other parks, partners, the Northeast Regional Office, other regions, WASO, and others in order to enhance staff and visitor experiences. This may be done through such actions as evaluating the relative effectiveness of all interpretive delivery systems, prioritizing actions based on findings, reallocating existing resources and identifying new ones, developing technology-based services, and piloting new programs and evaluating their effectiveness.

Action IV

Parks and the Northeast Regional Office develop an active staff training and information program for new technologies and share lessons learned with the larger NPS community.

GOAL 6

Open New Doors to Learning

Parks provide meaningful and relevant resource-based opportunities for life-long learning for diverse audiences, particularly for cultural minorities and populations who have felt excluded from parks. Schools, colleges, civic and academic institutions, organizations, and life-long learners recognize and use parks as dynamic classrooms to enhance learning, to engage in civic dialogue, and to transform their interests into personal action.

Action I

Parks offer a menu of life-long learning opportunities that serve a wide variety of learning styles and interests, encourage personal inquiry, foster civic dialogue, and provoke critical thinking.

Action II

Parks create opportunities for their use as forums for public discussion, civic dialogue, and civic engagement.

Action III

Parks develop regional, multi-park, and park-specific strategies to reach diverse audiences, including cultural minorities, using technologies and marketing techniques in order to strengthen our credibility and increase public recognition of parks as places and sources of life-long learning.

Action IV

Parks and regional I & E staff identify and establish agreements with organizations (e.g., universities, Telephone Pioneers, professional organizations, AARP, Elderhostel) to enhance opportunities and create new networks for program development, marketing, visitor feedback, recruitment, and other mutually beneficial endeavors.

GOAL 7

Invest in Students and Educators

Parks offer curriculum-based education programs for students of all ages, especially school-age students, so that children have quality educational “park experiences” during their elementary and high school years.

Action I

Each park incorporates education into the Comprehensive Interpretive Plan in order to ensure that general experience goals are identified and prioritized for curriculum-based and other resource-based education programs. Parks should consider education when making decisions about desired audiences, actions, and issues addressing themes and experiences.

Action II

An Education Plan is developed that addresses the details of educational programming such as determining grades (audiences) to be served, curriculum standards which best relate to the park story, civic engagement strategies, issues affecting the implementation of educational programs at the site, and long- and short-term strategies to ensure sustainable programming.

Action III

The Northeast Center for Education Services (NCES) supports parks in the NER and serves as a source of expertise and technical assistance in educational evaluation, fundraising, strategic planning, professional development, and the application of technology, current theory, and effective methodology. NCES will establish contacts and relationships with other facilities, programs, and centers that exemplify model educational services. To assist parks and partners, the NCES will develop a cadre of both NPS and non-NPS experts..

Action IV

Parks work with the NCES to complete the “Exploring the Real Thing” (ERT) database and website (www.nps.gov/ert) to market educational services to teachers nationwide, and to provide administrative data about educational programs.

Action V

NCES provides and facilitates professional development opportunities for park staff, partners, and educators in all aspects of curriculum-based programming. NCES helps strengthen the Interpretive Development Program’s (IDP) education track.

Action VI

NER works with the NPS Education Council and the NPS Advisory Board’s Education Committee to develop demonstration projects and to raise the profile of education in the NPS.

Article VII

Parks seek ways to embed civic engagement opportunities into education programs and services, especially for school-age children.

GOAL 8

Foster America's Best Interpreters and Educators

Interpreters at all levels seek their own professional development opportunities and execute their responsibilities with innovation and professionalism. NPS managers create a climate conducive to professional growth and learning.

Action I

Managers, supervisors, and interpreters use IDP tools in audits, coaching, and in critical results accountability to ensure that interpretive programs and services are delivered competently, creating opportunities for visitors to make intellectual and emotional connections with the meanings and significance(s) ascribed to the resource.

Action II

Managers create succession strategies to develop interpretive leadership skills in staff at all levels in order to sustain progressive leadership in NER.

Action III

Interpreters assist employees (law enforcement, maintenance, resource management, etc.), volunteers, and partners who have contact with visitors in providing effective orientation and interpretation.

Action IV

Parks develop opportunities to create access, interest, and connections to all segments of the population in order to develop and retain a competent workforce that reflects the diversity of the nation.

Action V

Interpreters develop skills in areas such as planning, technology, and business.

Interpretation and Education Strategy Team

Maria Abonnel	Weir Farm National Historic Site
Joanne Blacoe	Northeast Regional Office, Philadelphia
Claire Comer	Shenandoah National Park
Noelle Conrad	Northeast Center for Education Services, New York
James Corless	Lowell National Historical Park
Tom Davies	Northeast Regional Office, Philadelphia
Kathy Dilonardo	Northeast Regional Office, Philadelphia
Kelly Fellner	Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area
Elizabeth Hoermann	Northeast Center for Education Services, Lowell
Cynthia Kryston	Lowell National Historical Park
Patti Reilly	Northeast Center for Education Services, New York
Russ Smith	Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park
Liza Stearns	Frederick Law Olmsted, John F. Kennedy and Longfellow National Historic Sites
Kathy Tevyaw	Northeast Center for Education Services, Providence
Lizzie Watts	New River Gorge National River

Editor: Sheila Kirschbaum
Photography and Design: Higgins & Ross

Notes

